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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the role of language in learning, this paper discusses schemata and symbolic thinking that help students learn from unfamiliar experiences. The first part of the paper introduces the idea of symbolic thinking by comparing students encountering new ideas with convention-goers making their way around a new city. The section suggests that the convention-goers can do this because they relate unfamiliar experiences to things that are already held in the mind symbolically and adjust old ideas on the basis of new information. The next part of the paper discusses language use in school, and contrasts Transmission teachers, those who see themselves as experts imparting a fixed body of knowledge, with Interpretation teachers, those who acknowledge and work with the ideas with which students come to school. The third part of the paper offers a communication model of language for learning, which encompasses individual capacities for language, language functions, communication modes, and audiences, while the fourth section suggests ways in which the model may be used to facilitate students' self-expressive uses of language. (Four references, a diagram of teaching styles, a diagram of the communication model, and a form for mapping current curricula are included.) (JC)

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Connecting: A Theoretical Basis for Creative Self-Expression and Communication

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Session F4 3:00-4:15 PM
The Communication Connection: Creative Self-Expression through Symbolization in the Middle Grades
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Language and Learning

Our session title and titles for our respective presentations use several key words: communication, symbolization, connecting, and creative self-expression. In my presentation, I will explore these constructs in relationship to language and learning in the life experiences of human beings. As we explore these ideas, I will suggest a model of communication that can serve as a basis both for the language arts curriculum and for uses of language across the curriculum. In order to look more directly at the role of language in learning, it may be helpful momentarily to move away from a focus on learning in schools.

For many of us the last few days have been filled with new experiences. We have travelled to an unfamiliar city, reached a hotel we have never been in before, met new people and renewed acquaintances with old friends, eaten unfamiliar foods, and contemplated both new ideas and familiar ideas presented in new contexts. How is it that we, as human beings, are able to manage all of these new experiences more or less successfully?

Jimmy Britton suggests that we are able to do this because, while we have not encountered exactly this set of experiences before, they are not truly new. Rather, we are able to handle these experiences because we

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have learned about them from similar experiences through which:

> we construct a representation of the world as we experience it, and from this representation, this cumulative record of our own past, we generate expectations which, as moment by moment the future becomes the present, enable us to interpret the present.
>
> (Britton, 1970, p. 12)

In fact, Britton argues that it is the ability to represent experience symbolically that makes us truly human. He points out that language is only one form of symbolism. He says:

> But language, as we shall see, is only one way of symbolizing what is in the universe, and we cannot explain the particular workings of language unless we see their relations with other ways of symbolizing and with the nature of the symbolizing process itself (or with what is common to all ways).
>
> (Britton, 1970, p. 13)

How does this symbolic representation occur? Think about your own experiences this week. You arrived at new airport. When you exited the plane how did you know where to go to find luggage, if it arrived? How did you know how to find ground transport? When you reached the hotel how did you know where and how to register? You went to an unfamiliar restaurant. The menu contained descriptions of the ingredients in foods you had not eaten before. How did you know which entree you would enjoy? You encountered a friend you had not seen in many years. How did you know it was the person you remembered?

One answer is that you didn't know any of these things. Another answer is that you sort of knew each of them, because you had previously built symbolic representations from negotiating similar experiences. You had knowledge that you were able to use, even though you may not have

considered it consciously. The knowledge that you used may have been in the form of concepts stored in language. Or it may have been in visual images, in gustatory memories, or in auditory memories. Through those symbolic representations you were able to connect present to past and make predictions about the future. Through prior experiences you created your own understanding of the world--you learned how to interpret, what to expect, and how to operate.

Further, as you drew on this intuitive knowledge to negotiate these experiences, you were continuing to learn--you were altering or adjusting present perceptions or were adding new knowledge to your representation of the world based on these new events. This suggests that all learning involves active construction of meaning through processes of representation. It is through symbolic representation that we create our understandings of events in the world in such a way that we can use them in the future.

The natural learning processes that we have all used this week, in fact, use moment-by-moment our whole life long, have implications for learning in school. In natural learning environments persons of all ages interact with experiences and other persons to actively construct knowledge of their world. In the process, they also learn ways of learning and knowing. Gordon Wells (1986) has suggested that storying is a primary means through which human society makes sense of its experience--or makes meaning. Sometimes these stories are public and overt, as when we tell personal stories, gossip, or write. At other times we make meaning by engaging in what Wells calls "inner storying" (p. 195). He says:

> Each act of recognition, whether it be of objects in the external world perceived through our senses or of a conceptual relationship "seen" through an act of the mind, involves a sort of inner storying.

> This is how we make sense of it.
>
> Rarely, if ever do we have all the necessary visual or other sensory information to decide unambiguously what it is we are seeing, hearing, or touching. Instead we draw on our mental model of the world to construct a story that would be plausible in the context and use that to check the data of sense against the predictions that the story makes possible.
>
> (Wells, 1986, p. 195)

Language in School

As we negotiated our way through this week we drew on and modified our mental models through the use of language and other processes of symbolism for learning. As we met each new event or encountered new ideas we took an active role in processing these situations or ideas, using our present knowledge and beliefs to interpret experiences to make them part of our inner story of the world. While this form of learning is common for preschoolers in the home and in students' lives outside of school, it is often not the pattern found in school. For as Barnes points out in his book From Communication to Curriculum (1976), many teachers see themselves as transmitters of knowledge, rather than as persons who facilitate students' interpretation of knowledge. Barnes compares the Transmission and the Interpretation teacher on: (1) the teacher's view of knowledge, (2) what he values in the pupils, (3) his view of his own role, and (4) his evaluation of his pupils' participation. His comparison, as shown in Diagram 1, suggests very different views of learning and the functions of language in learning.

Insert Diagram 1 about here

Diagram 1

The Transmission teacher...	The Interpretation teacher...
(1) Believes knowledge to exist in the form of public disciplines which include content and criteria of performance	(1) Believes knowledge to exist in the knower's ability to organize thought and action
(2) Values the learners' performances insofar as they conform to the criteria of the discipline	(2) Values the learner's commitment to interpreting reality, so that criteria arise as much from the learner as from the teacher
(3) Perceives the teacher's task to be the evaluation and correction of the learner's performance, according to criteria of which he is the guardian	(3) Perceives the teacher's task to be the setting up of a dialogue in which the learner can reshape his knowledge through interaction with others
(4) Perceives the learner as an uninformed acolyte for whom access to knowledge will be difficult since he must qualify himself through tests of appropriate performance	(4) Perceives the learner as already possessing systematic and relevant knowledge, and the means of reshaping that knowledge

Source: Douglas Barnes. From Communication to Curriculum. Hammondsworth, England, Penguin Books, 1976, pp. 144-145. (Available in the US through Boynton/Cook.)

In a Transmission classroom, the teacher controls knowledge and the language used to access it. In that classroom, teacher language is used largely to inform and to control students. The teacher gives information in bits conceived to fit the learners' capabilities and structures situations for the student to display that knowledge. The student's primary use of language is to demonstrate mastery of knowledge received, often in response to questions. This response may amount to little more than regurgitation of one word or phrasal answers.

As you can see by reflecting on your uses of language during the last week, natural learning involves a much more active role on the part of the learner and a much wider variety of functions of language. In natural learning situations human beings use language interactively to get attention, to request information, to influence or direct themselves and others, to clarify, to predict, to share feelings--that is to make meaning of their experiences by connecting present to past in a way that can affect the future. This is the language that characterizes the classroom of the Interpretation teacher. Here students use various modes of language to communicate their understanding of experiences to themselves and to others. The teacher collaborates with students to support and facilitate this active creation of meaning.

A Communication Model of Language for Learning

To bring this natural process of learning into many classrooms, will require a radical shift in our conception of learning and the type of communication that facilitates learning. Diagram 2 is a model of communication which I developed for use in A Guide to Curriculum Development in Language Arts (Iowa Department of Education, 1986). It will also be used in a guide to communication across the curriculum, K-12, that I am presently preparing for the Iowa Department of Education.

Insert Diagram 2 about here

Because it is focused on the elements involved in all natural communication processes, this model can serve as a guide for teachers as they attempt to support students' growth in language for learning and self-expression. In the model, the inner circle represents the basic capacities each individual possesses. The three outer circles represent the elements of the communication process: language functions, communication modes, and audiences. When the outer circles are rotated, they offer the possible communication situations that persons encounter lifelong. Only the outer circle, audience, is age-level dependent. As students mature socially and emotionally, growth in ability to communicate with larger and more impersonal audiences can be expected to develop.

Let's consider how the model works by using a simple communication act that most of us have engaged in this week--asking for directions. Individual capacities worked in concert to prompt us to feel the need to ask, to perceive an individual as a likely respondent, and to use thought, language, and movement to create and express our request. In requesting directions we integrated several functions of language, we used rituals of seeking attention from a stranger, used informing and controlling functions to indicate what help we needed, and probably conveyed our feelings of uncertainty, frustration, or panic. As we attempted to comprehend the directions, we utilized informing, controlling, and imagining functions as we mentally pictured the steps to be followed. The rituals of seeking clarification or thanking were no doubt used, as was expression of feeling--whether relief and assurance or continued confusion and uncertainty. Such a situation surely utilized the oral and visual/nonverbal modes of communication, as we spoke, listened,

MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

Interaction of Individual Capacities, Language Function, Communication Mode, and Audience

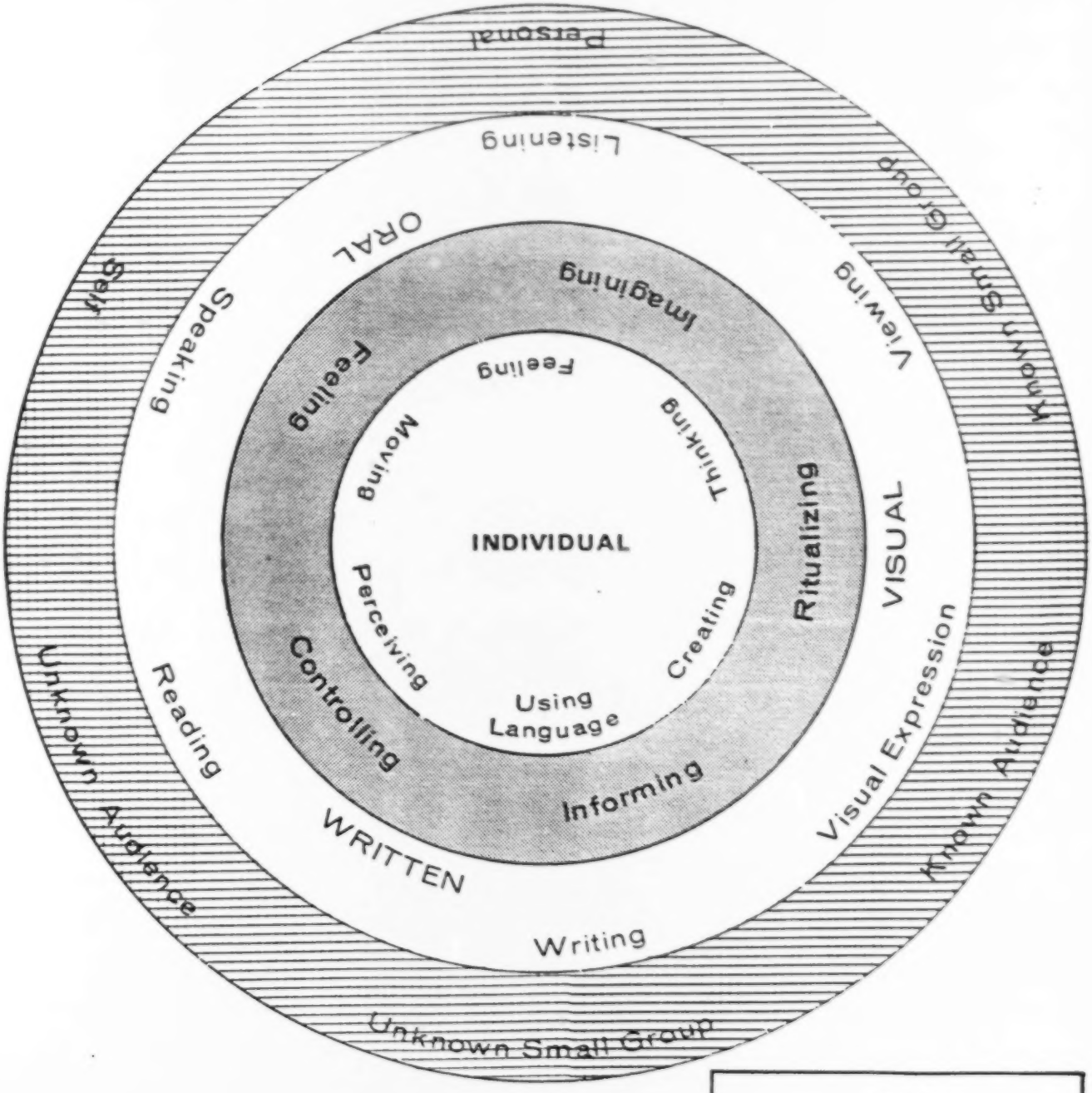

Diagram 2

Source: Iowa Department of Education. A Guide to Curriculum Development in Language Arts, (Des Moines, IA: Iowa Department of Education, 1986), 12.

and used and interpreted facial and gestural signs. It would be very common for written communication to be involved, as well, perhaps in the form of a map or of street signs or landmarks. Audience might have been a person or small group--known or unknown.

Concentric circles are used in this model rather than the traditional scope and sequence grid for three reasons: (1) to show the integration of the components within each element; (2) to show the integration of the three elements within any communication act; and (3) to show that growth in individual capacities and in elements of the communication process are global, not linear and sequential. Students enter school able to use communication for all of its functions and in varying modes with diverse audiences. As they mature, they grow in the range of strategies which they are able to use to create and communicate meaning.

Use of the Communication Model to Facilitate the Communication Connection

The teacher who wishes to facilitate students' self-expressive uses of language to connect their personal knowledge to new experiences can use the model as a planning tool. By assessing the learning experience that they use, teachers can identify the personal capacities, language functions, modes, and audiences involved. A simple mapping form (Diagram 3) can permit a teacher (1) to monitor uses to assure diversity of experiences, (2) to consider ways in which further integration can enhance learning for students, and, (3) to anticipate students' needs in order to better serve the facilitative role of an Interpretation model teacher.

Insert Diagram 3 about here

Wells summarizes this collaborative role of the teacher when he says:

> We are meaning makers--every one of us: children, parents, and teachers. To try to make sense, to construct stories, and to share

APPENDIX C

FORM FOR MAPPING PRESENT CURRICULUM

Teacher_____ Course or Area_____

Level_____ Dates or Time Span_____

Directions: Briefly describe learning experiences in your current program. List present focus in individual capacities, function, mode, and/or audience, as appropriate. Use Diagram 2 to identify extensions to enhance integration.

Brief Description of Present Learning Experience	Individual Capacities, Language Function(s), Communication Mode(s), and Audience(s)	Extensions of Focus to Enhance Integration

Diagram 3

Source: Iowa Department of Education. A Guide to Curriculum Development in Language Arts, (Des Moines, IA: Iowa Department of Education, 1986), 73.

> them with others in speech and in writing is an essential part of being human. For those of us who are more knowledgeable and more mature--parents and teachers--the responsibility is clear: to interact with those in our care in such a way as to foster and enrich their meaning making.
>
> (Wells, 1986, p. 222)

Conclusion

The next presentation will exemplify the facilitative role of a teacher who believes in students' abilities to make meaning by making connections through processes of communication. As you share this experience, be aware of the processes of symbolism, including language, that the students use. Also notice the integration of language functions; of oral, written, and visual modes of communication; and of varied audiences as students use communication processes to construct meaning.

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